

U.S. Defense Attaché to Sierra Leone providing information for emergency evacuation of personnel in Liberia, July 2003



786th Communications Squadron (Justin D. Pyle)

# Transforming Military Diplomacy

By TIMOTHY C. SHEA

**S**ince the collapse of the Soviet Union and concurrent with the war on terror, military attachés have been fully involved in a wide range of defense-related activities supporting national policymakers and combatant commanders. The political map has changed in the last decade, increas-

ing the importance of soldier-diplomats serving abroad. Since 1945, the international system has expanded from 51 sovereign states to almost 200 today. Ten years ago, the United States opened new Embassies in 14 countries on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Each of these newly independent Eurasian states has emerged

with congealing national and cultural identities, including a rediscovery of native languages long suppressed under Soviet policies.

The fragmentation of Cold War-era nation-states and the growing number of failed governments challenge U.S. diplomatic missions across the globe. Anti-Americanism and radical movements directed against the United States are on the rise. Even some traditional allies are no longer reliable. The U.S. military footprint grows smaller in many regions, raising the importance of maintaining access points with countries that are receptive to U.S. policies *before* a crisis occurs. Combatant commanders rely heavily on the diplomatic work conducted by Embassy country teams. But a decade after the lifting of the Iron Curtain, the Department of Defense (DOD) has not adequately adjusted to the security challenges facing the attaché corps and its military-diplomatic mission. This article outlines how transformation of the military attaché corps will substantially improve capabilities.

Supporting these diplomatic missions are Defense Attaché Offices (DAOs), ranging in size from an established organization comprised of 14 attachés under a general/flag officer in Moscow to fledgling, one-deep operations headed by Army majors in some Central Asian and Caucasus countries. The DAO is the permanent DOD office assigned to U.S. diplomatic missions. Headed by the Defense Attaché (DATT), it has complex command relationships with the ambassador, the combatant commander, Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and the Defense Intelligence Agency. The ambassador's country team is a microcosm of the interagency with representation by most Federal agencies, all under the umbrella of the U.S. Embassy. The DATT represents all DOD organizations on the country team and manages complex command relationships with all these elements inside and outside the Embassy. In most cases, however, the attaché does not have formal authority

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92nd Communications Squadron (Lapetra Tolson)

over other elements but merely coordinates their activity. The combatant commander has no direct link to the country teams within his area of operations. This flawed arrangement misses a tremendous opportunity to enhance interagency coordination.

Other obstacles undermine the effectiveness of military diplomacy, such as the prevailing view that an

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attaché assignment does not enhance promotion prospects. Unlike many officers who later became major military figures of the First and Second World Wars, few of today's general/flag officers have served as military attachés. The relative absence of intelligence professionals with attaché experience also inadvertently works to diminish the potential impact of its military-diplomatic mission. The situation is analogous to the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community before the value of its unique capabilities, professional sophistication, and small numbers was appreciated by the mainstream military some 20 years ago.

The transformed military attaché corps consists of three components: a new attaché headquarters at the combatant command, a fully manned DAO that handles all DOD functions and missions in-country, and an enhanced operational role for military attachés. Too much coordination at present takes place well forward in the Embassy because the "interagency process" is crippled at the combatant command level. It occurs primarily inside the Beltway or inside the Embassy. An attaché headquarters at the combatant command in the form of a new directorate could better reconcile guidance and policy both internally and with other Federal agencies to direct more effective operations in-country.

Especially in light of the recent Unified Command Plan (UCP) change moving Russia to the European Command area of responsibility, it makes good sense to reassign military attachés directly to combatant commands. During the Cold War, large portions of the globe were not assigned to combatant commanders, necessitating a centralized headquarters for attachés. Other DOD stovepipe organizations with narrow responsibilities managing in-country security assistance or arms control could

be eliminated and consolidated with other duties performed by military attachés. Reflagging these billets to more highly trained military attaché positions will improve efficiency without a net increase in overall DOD manpower. This realignment will better accommodate the valuable operational role of DAOs, increase attaché access to host nation counterparts, raise the level of bilateral cooperation, substantially reorder skewed mission priorities, improve information operations, and streamline the synchronization of assets in-country for improved strategic agility.

### **More than Protocol, Alcohol, and Cholesterol**

The term *attaché* has a significant and precise meaning in diplomatic usage. A military officer simply sent abroad is not an attaché; he must be accorded full diplomatic status and, as such, is afforded complete diplomatic immunity. From the beginning, the military attaché was something of a hybrid in the world of international relations. He was part diplomat, part soldier, part scout, and perhaps, as Lord George Curzon suggested, not entirely welcome. Military attachés were the Nation's eyes and ears abroad in the days before satellite photography and sophisticated electronic collection techniques. For example, most of the information about Axis armed forces before December 1941 came from routine, tedious, and often unappreciated peacetime observations by Army attachés. The services sought congressional approval in September 1888 to establish a number of Army and Naval attaché positions in Berlin, London, Paris, Rome, St. Petersburg, and Vienna. Regulations authorized wear of the aiguillette, an item of military ornamentation and the international symbol of the military attaché, in 1910. At the outbreak of war in 1914, Washington had 23 attachés assigned abroad, and they had become a regular feature of the majority of Embassies.

During the Cold War, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara designated



a senior military attaché in each foreign country—the DATT—to supervise and coordinate the work of all service attachés. While every military organization requires someone in charge, the current system arbitrarily designates the DATT from the various services to particular countries. The Army and Air

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Attachés are often the same rank, and even though one may be vastly more qualified to serve as the DATT, principles of service equities take precedence over competence. Selecting the best-qualified officer would dramatically improve the effectiveness of military diplomacy and ultimately force all services to develop serious foreign area officer programs.

The defense attaché system structure, mission, and manning have not evolved with the changes of the last decade that require increased levels of involvement in operational activity. The primary attaché function of observing and reporting is often considered to be in direct conflict with time and energy spent on other nonintelligence activities. Intelligence and military-

diplomatic activity are not zero-sum competing requirements. Narrow specialization by other DOD elements has undermined the overall effectiveness of the military attaché by reducing access to the host nation military. DOD representation abroad should be the military attaché. Security assistance and arms control would be better managed by trained attachés with the requisite language skills, cultural knowledge, and regional expertise. This approach

would eliminate parochialism, reduce overhead, streamline operations, and simplify bilateral coordination for the host nation military.

Transformation of the military attaché corps begins at the higher headquarters. The nature and function of a headquarters influence the priorities of its subordinate elements. By eliminating stovepipe organizations inside the U.S. Embassy in a consolidated DAO, the combatant command headquarters will need to establish a Politico-Military Directorate to manage, deconflict, and synchronize the activities of military attachés. This transformed organization will integrate national requirements for observing and reporting, supporting operational and exercise taskings, security assistance, and strat-

egy and policy. More coherent policy and guidance will enable the military attachés to apply the informational instrument of national power more effectively. Making the director of this new organization within each combatant command a general/flag officer with attaché experience will brighten the promotion prospects for attaché duty and attract higher quality officers.

### Realigned Mission Priorities

Security cooperation and the war on terror have increased the strategic importance of military attachés serving abroad. Considering the extensive actions to coordinate the deployment of U.S. forces against the Taliban in Afghanistan and support the train-and-equip operation in Georgia, attachés provide a tremendous value to the combatant commanders as operators and reporters. Independent of transformation, they have four main missions that seamlessly blend.

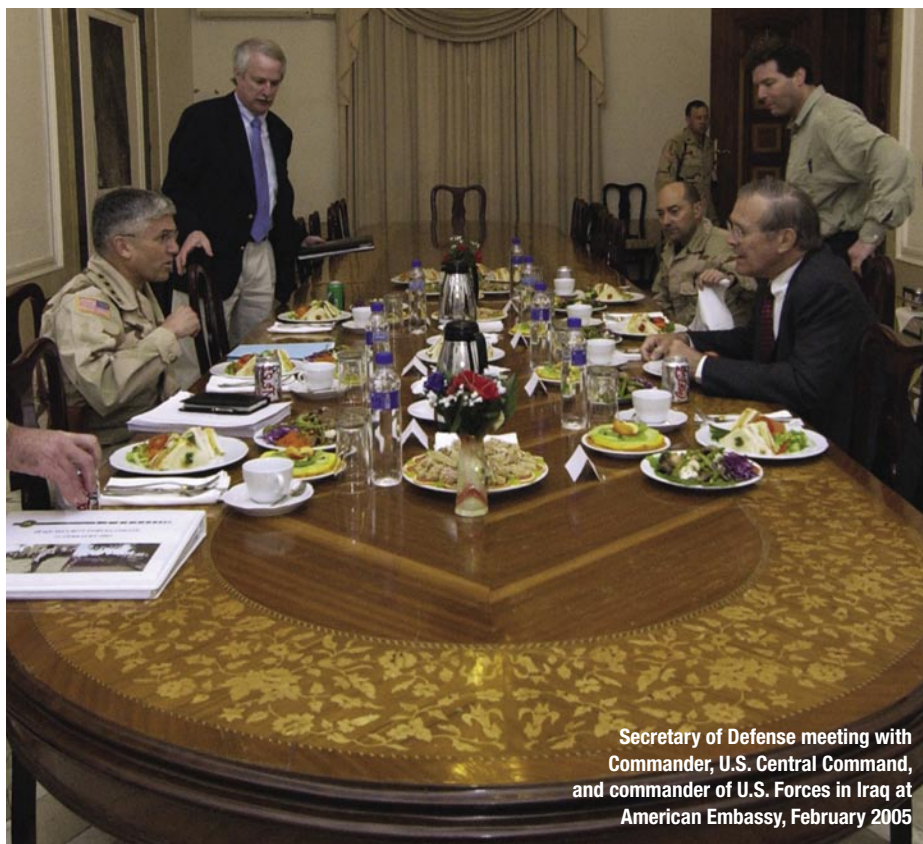
*Advising the Ambassador.* Military attachés must know the host nation military and strategic environment and be intimate with the U.S. military's capabilities to support diplomatic and engagement measures. The DATT provides advice on the full range of issues concerning regional security, to include the attitudes and intentions of the host nation and other nations engaged in regional activities. Finally, most DATTs also serve as the U.S. defense representative charged with managing the coordination of administrative and security matters of all DOD personnel who fall under responsibility of the U.S. Ambassador. However, this command relationship would be more effective with defense attachés assigned to the same higher headquarters as the other DOD elements—the combatant command.

*Representing DOD to the host nation.* More than playing a ceremonial role, military attachés are a highly visible symbol of the Armed Forces. Especially



DOD (Robert D. Ward)

**DOD leaders and Defense Attaché in Copenhagen host meeting with Danish Minister of Defense at Pentagon, August 9, 2004**



Secretary of Defense meeting with  
Commander, U.S. Central Command,  
and commander of U.S. Forces in Iraq at  
American Embassy, February 2005

1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Cherie A. Thurlby)

critical in Eurasia where the Iron Curtain allowed for little interaction with Americans during the Cold War, they provide daily access to the host na-

### many countries recognize the strategic importance of their attachés and send only their best abroad

tion military regarding information, capabilities, and strategies. They are generally contacted before all others in a crisis. They serve a large public diplomacy function as well.

*Reporting conditions in the host country.* Attachés observe military conditions and developments. This is a continuous mission that must be integrated into all their activities. To succeed in security cooperation, policymakers and decisionmakers require actionable information. It is often attaché input that makes for effective security cooperation programs. During periods of heightened tension and crisis, the attaché supports the combatant

commander by becoming his eyes and ears on the scene, responding quickly to time-sensitive information requirements. Increasingly, military attachés serve as the conduit for sharing information, especially in support of the war on terror. Lastly, corruption remains a huge problem in Eurasia, and military attachés provide oversight to monitor whether U.S. resources and funds are used appropriately.

*Managing security cooperation programs.* Worldwide, about half of all DAOs manage formal security assistance programs such as the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program and Foreign Military Financing (FMF). In activities unique to the former Soviet Union, the military attaché already plays a substantial role in coordinating and executing the extensive military-to-military programs, exercises, and deployments, which frequently dwarf IMET and FMF responsibilities. Even in coun-

tries with security assistance offices, attachés still make recommendations on spending priorities and approve IMET candidates.

### Improved Manning Posture

Many DATT positions in remote regions are occupied by hard-working but junior majors or senior first-time attachés with limited choices for their terminal assignment. Lack of experience, language skills, rank, or maturity is not a recipe for success. Many countries recognize the strategic importance of their military attachés and send only their best abroad. Because of the symbolic and ceremonial importance of rank, and the requirement for experience and maturity, DATT billets should be filled by colonels (or Navy captains) and represented by the service that logically corresponds to that which dominates in the host country. Most importantly, DAOs must have sufficient depth to permit attachés to operate in multiple geographical locations.

To what degree is the United States able to resort to military power without dependence on foreign governments? The military attaché manages the day-to-day bilateral relations for national policymakers and combatant commanders. Transforming the attaché corps will substantially improve the steady state military diplomacy that must be conducted *prior* to any crisis. Changing the status quo will improve interagency coordination and provide the combatant commander the representation he needs within his area of responsibility. The military attaché corps must adapt to the new strategic environment, which demands skillful military diplomacy and knowledgeable professionals. Like the Special Operations Soldiers who achieved fame in Afghanistan by demonstrating their strategic value, military attachés have the potential to provide significant returns in the area of military diplomacy, while at the same time providing better reporting on a wider range of important issues.

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